

# Metaphor and Reality: A Meditation on Man, Nature and Words

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Abstract: This essay is a 1982 sequel to the 1978 essay in which Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism" to define a critical approach focusing on literature's place in the ecological web of life, with special attention to literature's power to energize community, as theorized by Burke's dramatism. This energizing of community must be combined with ecological realism to advance the ultimate cause of ecocriticism. The 1978 essay ended with the proclamation, "Free us from figures of speech," later revised to "Free us from false figures of speech." Attempting to mediate between man, nature, and words, this 1982 sequel is much more an explorative inquiry (a la Burke) than a standard academic essay. Scrutinizing the ways of metaphor, it concludes that metaphor's essential value resides in its creative capacity to discover new ways of thinking. Then, in its second part, it explores both (1) the metaphors needed now to save the planet, and (2) the metaphors that are false because of their catastrophic effects on humans and nature.

METAPHORS ARE ONTOLOGICAL RIDDLES. They cross and join different kinds and categories of beings which, in reality, cannot be joined. Hence, they always present us with ontological riddles, which we must partially solve if we are to understand the metaphor.

I am a rock. Unless we have personified the rock and made it speak, as we often do in cartoons, this is a metaphor and will always be something of a riddle. We may share atoms with rocks and have in us substances that have come from rocks, but we cannot *be* a rock.

Metaphors initiate a deriddling process. He is a rock. He is hard, tough, unmoving, unmovable, passive, inert; what kind of rock, hard rock, soft rock, big rock, little rock: incapable of self locomotion, at the lowest order of being, incapable of speech (even though he says he is a rock).

Metaphors do not exchange being both ways or do they? Is Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth" all metaphors? When he lists and names and randomly catalogues, is he not making metaphors, saying I am what is outside of me over and over again, in a series of ontological interchanges?

Metaphors transfer being. No question about that. They are ontological crossovers, though it is not always so easy to figure out which way the crossover goes. I am a rock. Does the I share being with the rock, have in himself some of the qualities of the rock or vice versa? Is this a negative or a positive statement? You have to be careful with your metaphors.

Similes are fundamentally different from metaphors. He is a cannibal. He is like a cannibal. No one would be confused by the simile. If the first statement is true, however, you had better watch out. If it is a metaphor, you had better try to deriddle it. We often say that students are cannibals. This is clearly a metaphor. How do we know that? Well, because they have not really killed, cooked and eaten us. They might like to. They have only cannibalized us. That does not help much either. More deriddling is necessary. Cannibals kill, cook and usually eat other human beings. How do our students metaphorically kill, cook (usually) and eat us? Better come back to that one later.

You can make metaphors out of any two things for which there are words. Metaphors are made of words because the word is not the thing it stands for, or names. Question: I saw a painting of a flower which halfway up the stem turned into a bird. Is that a visual metaphor? Flowers are birds. Birds are flowers. Flowering birds. Birding flowers.

Image, simile, symbol, analogy metaphor is none of these others and metaphors are not necessarily, as the definitions suggest, based upon analogy, or indirect similes. A transfer of some kind certainly takes place in metaphors, but it is not always clear what is being transferred to what, and the worst thing you can do is oversimplify a complex metaphor, or, the conception of metaphor itself.

Every metaphor alters or modifies an existing reality- at least at the verbal level. Charlie's girl is a real dog. The girl is a dog and Charley is something of a dog for going with her. The girl is not really a dog nor is Charley. The metaphor lowers the girl from human to animal, and lowers Charley to the level of the already lowered girl for choosing her. This metaphor may in fact transfer being, but more accurately, it takes away being unless you belong to a dog cult, and mean it as a compliment.

The interesting question is how you can alter or modify an existing reality without really modifying it. Are we made of words? By words? You can kill people with words. Men have died from metaphors. Men still die from them. Animals, left to themselves, would never suffer from metaphors. Domesticated, bred and absorbed into the human world, animals are transformed by metaphors into what they are not: children, bar companions, sexual partners, best friends.

Kenneth Burke says that perspective is another word for metaphor. Yes and no. Perspective is an epistemological term. Originally, it was an optical/spatial term until it was transferred to the inner eye, as "vision" was and referred to the way in which one's mind looks at or views things. What is your perspective? What are your master metaphors? Tell me your metaphors and I'll tell you your perspective. Maybe. What if your perspective is to have no metaphors, as William Carlos Williams does in many of his poems. Images are not metaphors. The thing itself is free of metaphors. If you make poems out of pure images of things and their attributes, as Williams often did, you are trying to perceive the thing without metaphors, as it is, in terms of itself. The only human concession you make to it is to transform it into words in order to make a poem. The poem has its own verbal being and honors the being of the thing.

There are no metaphors in nature. Burke says that there are no negatives in nature. For that matter there are no words in nature, either, or similes, or symbols. Nature is all analogical, by its very nature, whether we discover, describe and codify these analogies or not. The basis for many similes is in nature itself, and depends upon our ability to perceive similarities, resemblances, analogies and the great analogical matrix that is intrinsic to nature itself. Not always so with metaphors. Metaphors transcend nature. The analogies would be *in* nature, and relationship among all the things in nature, whether there were humans and words or not. Without humans, there would be no words and no metaphors and, if Burke is right, no negatives. A black hole is not negative space. There could not be anything such as negative space. But think of the metaphors we can make out of black holes. Things simply are, in nature.

Burke says that man adds the negative, especially the moral/ethical negative, and irony to nature. Man also adds negative numbers and the concept of negative being. And metaphors. What does it mean to add metaphors to nature. Or, prior to that, what does it mean to say that

there are no metaphors in nature. Metaphors are ontological riddles because they crossbreed to produce an unnatural, but all too human, offspring. You can literally make anything or make anything happen, with words, as William Gass is always reminding us. And you can do it by *fiat*. Every metaphor is a new *fiat*. Metaphors create new being and meaning. They create new realities.

Queen Mary and a few others in the world can truthfully say, "My daughter is a queen." The rest of us have to make a metaphor, if we happen to have a daughter. Metaphors are a wonderful source of wish fulfillment. But why limit them to this function. You can do anything you like with metaphors: increase or decrease being, demonize, animalize, avianize, elephantize, empower, depower and so forth. And you can do this with suppressed metaphors as well. Say you write about birds but never make any overt bird metaphors; or say I write a whole book about the poetics of flight. Am I not really being metaphorical without using actual metaphors and saying I *am* a bird (a patent realistic, empirical absurdity); I want to share being with birds; I want to fly; I want to enjoy the freedom of flight.

Metaphors give us a lot of dream-being. Who thinks about the parasites that plague birds when he makes bird metaphors? Metaphors are anti-empirical by their very nature and often suppress one reality to create another. With words and metaphors (almost a redundancy), we are free to become birds if we like. And not free. Metaphor and reality instruct us almost better than anything else in the ways of freedom and necessity.

Metaphors do not follow the laws of logic. In fact, they are often illogical and remind us that man does not and cannot live by reason alone. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." Absurd you say. "And Mourners to and fro, / Kept treading—treading—till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through—" Impossible and nonsensical. Not really, though this poem by Emily Dickinson is so completely and densely metaphorical one hesitates to force it out of its metaphors toward the clarities demanded by interpretation. One yearns for a pure unmediated intuitive experience of the poem; but this is never—or seldom—possible.

The metaphors of this poem tease us into thought. What they actually did for Emily Dickinson is not really our concern, since we can never verify the psychological validity of the experiences which this sustained funeral metaphor renders. We can imagine a hypothetical "I" and realize that the sustained metaphor renders something which happened to this I. We first think that the poem is about the loss of someone else: a friend, a lover, a parent, a sister or brother. But the more you read the poem, the less this seems to be true. For it to be true, one has to assume that there has been a complete internalization of the external event which ritualizes and mediates the death and loss: the funeral service, the mourners arriving, the service itself (stanza two), the removal of the casket, the exit from the church toward the graveyard (stanza three), the tolling of the funeral bell (stanza four); and then, in stanza five, the casket being put into the ground as the service is completed. Here is the whole poem:

I felt a Funeral, in my brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum—  
Kept beating—beating—till I thought  
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again  
Then Space—began to toll.

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke  
And I dropped down, and down—  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing—then—

The easiest thing one can do with this poem is *work* out the metaphor; the hardest thing one has to do with the poem is understand or interpret the metaphor; that is, reduce it, and the poem, to what it is not. Burke has called this the paradox of substance (the paradox of interpretation?) and it means here that we must destroy the metaphors in order to understand them, for though we may intuit the fact of the metaphor, we cannot often intuit more than a fragment of its meaning. Sometimes it seems that we should follow the dictum that what the poet has joined together, no critic should take asunder. But if we did that, there would be no criticism and the dialectic of creation and interpretation would be broken. Metaphors would remain a secret language. The critic would be unemployed.

Metaphors add new being to reality and we do not commit infanticide when we subject them to careful, thoughtful actions of the critical mind. Emily Dickinson was always imagining and then writing poems about her own death. It was one of her ways of exploring her own range of being, usually beginning with the finite and extending into the infinite. It could only be understood as a form of hypothesizing. Much of this poem, for example, is hypothetical and cast in "as if" terms. She feels a funeral in her brain—that is, something in her mind dies—and she thinks (somewhat paradoxically) that some illumination is taking place, that she will finally understand the great enigma of death, and the crossover from the finite to the infinite. Her mind goes numb and after her body is put in the coffin, she feels them carry it (her) across her soul. Actually, she feels them "creak" across her soul, as if she were being transported in a wagon of some sort. The metaphor has carried her through her own death, funeral and burial. Her soul—or that part of her that is immortal and infinite—is left behind, or rather just left.

The terrible, terrifying conclusion to the poem now begins. Space—the whole cosmos—begins to toll like a funeral bell, and she is contracted now into pure absolute being, is an ear hearing this terrible tolling. That is, she is not there, in the beyond, in heaven, but here, on earth, infinity stuck in the finite, hearing the heavens ring. The last line of stanza four leaves her "wrecked, solitary, here" on earth, in the wrong place, incomplete, helpless and in despair. The funeral in the brain, then, is surely some kind of "rational" doubt, some loss of faith; the mind saying to the whole self that immortality and the ascent into heaven are logically, rationally impossible. The metaphor imagines this possibility to the end of the line in the final stanza. There, the funeral is completed with the lowering of the casket into the grave; the soul, or all that remains of the self in the poem, dropped out of being or, in slightly different terms, is dropped into total nonbeing. It would be bad enough to miss Heaven; but the metaphor takes the self beyond that and with a kind of brutal truthfulness, takes it beyond

knowing, which is into nothingness. We might say here that the last stanza plunges the self back into the finite world from which it came and that the metaphors of the poem tell again the final part of every individual human story that is unredeemed by a non-confirmable belief in the personal immortality promised us by Christianity. The end of the line is nothing, going out of being. The poem explores this unknowable but imaginable reality.

Everything in this poem is heavy and depressing. The mourners keep "treading, treading," the service keeps "beating, beating," the mind goes numb, the boots are of lead, space and all the heavens toll the bell of their own funeral. This is a poem about the possibility of a kind of absolute alienation and nonbeing. I stress the word *possibility*, because the very opposite possibility is worked out by means of the same funeral metaphor in "Because I could not stop for death," and in so simple a poem as "I Never Saw a Moor."<sup>1</sup>

And I, and silence, some strange race,  
Wrecked, solitary, here.

The metaphor has led her to these stark lines and possibility, and beyond. Metaphors are a way of exploring unknown realities.

Poems are not just made of metaphors, as we used to think. Metaphors are ubiquitous. Poems are made of words, just as metaphors are. Whether or not metaphors can be made of anything else besides words is another question. Is the plant, in the painting, growing into the wings and head of a bird, a metaphor? Is the mountain in the same painting whose peak is a bird's head a metaphor? The flower is a bird; the mountain is a bird. Are these visual metaphors or simple juxtapositions? In both cases, one category of thing flower and mountain grows into another, asserting, it would seem, exactly what all metaphors assert: the ontological riddle of double being, or, at least, shared being. Is, then, a collage multiple metaphors simultaneously, something never possible with linear language? Could we not make something similar by destroying the linearity of the sentence language and arranging words separately, non-syntactically on a page to create a kind of metaphorical matrix, more or less random in nature, depending upon which way your eye traveled? Robert Duncan has tried this. Anybody could do it somewhat mechanically, to be sure, by constructing a non syntactical rectangle of nouns, five across and five down; or more conventionally, since it is the shape of most poems, a rectangle of words, three across and five down, which could be read across, down, up, diagonally and randomly.

All of this may not seem useful except that we keep remembering how we can make anything out of words that produce metaphors, for metaphors create what never existed before, and the continuous creation of new metaphors is one of the wonders of the human mind, especially the minds of creative writers and creative thinkers who write. Metaphors die like all other beings but stay around to plague and haunt us. We have to learn to bury our dead metaphors. Otherwise, we will bury our minds instead. Hard as a rock is a Stone Age metaphor. The newspaper, especially the sports section, is a graveyard of dead metaphors, ghost-ridden, ghost-written. But every discipline is half-paralyzed by dead metaphors. Criticism: A poem is a well-wrought urn. Advertising, for example. Almost too moribund to think about. No poet or novelist would ever think of using another poet's metaphors. Why? Because the poets are always pushing onward in their imaginations toward new realms of being, new combinations of words, new metaphors. A poem full of dead metaphors is like a political speech. Politics and poetry don't mix. Politics is plagued by dead metaphors, many of which are extremely dangerous because they make thought unnecessary.

Riddles are meant to be solved. Poets do not write in unbreakable code. Even the most difficult and obscure poets write to be read or they would not send their precious poems out to be published and go around reading them to the public. If their metaphors are hard and obscure, it may be that their perceptions and/or their perspectives are radically different from ours. Sometimes it may take many years to learn how to read a poet's metaphors. Metaphors create ontological riddles which are meant to be solved, even though, as Oedipus discovered, the solving of the riddle may bring terrible knowledge with it. The riddle of the sphinx was only partially metaphorical, but it took metaphorical perception to realize that arms and a cane could be referred to as legs. Oedipus is the paradigm of the riddle - solver, including the mystery of his own origins and being. He finally deciphered all of the riddles sent to him by the Delphic Oracle and learned what it meant to be your own mother's husband and the father of your brothers and sisters. He discovered realities not made with words which no metaphors could riddle away. He discovered ontological riddles which had nothing to do with metaphors. He discovered what Emily Dickinson only imagined and feared when she felt the metaphorical funeral in her brain. But his ability to read metaphors set it all in motion.

Let's make a metaphor out of Oedipus. Freud did, after all, when he named the Oedipus complex and identified one of the most basic of all the many triangular relationship that exists between parents and children. O'Neill studied this triangulation—this metaphorical morass—in great detail in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a play that is full of buried metaphors and ontological riddles. I am Oedipus, you assert; I am Oedipal. That may give us an ontological riddle, but in fact, it describes the most terrible kinds of ontological confusions because it says that you do not know who you are or what you are. But metaphors do not always do this and one has to be careful. Sometimes metaphors say I know who and what I am (I am a rock), but you don't; or I know what and what you are but you don't. The riddles actually state an ontological certainty in riddling form. Keats says that the Grecian Urn is "The still unravished bride of quietness." There's no uncertainty here, just a rather peculiar and complicated in-between state of being which happens to be immensely appealing to Keats.

It is always tempting to translate metaphors into similes so that one can deal with them more readily. But there is a kind of lazy critical immorality in this procedure: metaphors are not similes; they derive from a different epistemological, even metaphysical base and they make entirely different kinds of assertions about the ontology of the things involved. "I felt a funeral in my brain." I felt as if there were a funeral taking place in my brain. The simile is a hypothetical statement which immediately causes one to start thinking analogically: what is happening inside her head is like what happens at a funeral. The metaphor is not hypothetical at all: it asserts that she feels a funeral in her brain and this causes us to wonder how that is possible. The metaphor is at a much higher level of reality and intensity than the simile. Instead of bifurcating our vision so that we think in double columns, going back and forth between them on the basis of similarities, metaphors present us with a unified or consubstantial vision in which two are one; or, perhaps a bit more accurately, *two* are brought together to create a new *one*, to give us a total of *three*.

Consider Dylan Thomas's "Light Breaks Where no Sun Shines," which is mostly all one paradoxical metaphor explored and ramified through four of the five stanzas. There is only one simile in the poem, and the whole poem really explores the ontological riddle of the compound paradoxical metaphor. No one line ever states the master metaphor of the poem, though many lines state part or versions of it: "Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart / Push in their tides"; "Dawn breaks behind the eyes." "From poles of skull and toe the windy blood / Slides like a sea" gives us the only simile in the poem and tempts us toward an analogical reading based upon the old macro/microcosm idea. But such a reading leaves the

poem in shambles, a jumble of comparisons between man and nature which do not work out to anything.

Here is the first line of the poem, which is also the first assertion of the metaphor: "Light breaks where no sun shines." Without the rest of the poem, this would be an unsolvable riddle in the sense that you could not say for sure which of many possible answers would be correct. But line two gives us "the waters of the heart" and makes it possible to say that the place where "no sun shines" is inside the human body. Terms from nature and from the human body (or human being) are found all through the poem. The terms from nature are drawn from the five conventional elements of nature: earth, air, fire (light, sun), water (sea) and sky. The human terms are drawn from allover: heart, flesh, bones, thighs, youth, man, hairs, eyes, skull, toe, smile, tears, eye sockets, thought, logic. The majority of the natural terms are light/sun terms. The usual procedure in the poem is to apply specific terms from nature to man, leaving the exact application of the natural term to man something of a riddle.

The first line is a good example because we do not know which of the possible "meanings" of sun and light are meant to apply to man. Maybe all are implied. What we do know is that the poem moves back and forth from nature to man establishing a series of paradoxical metaphors which make a complex statement about humans in particular and man and nature in general.

If one had to state the master metaphor of the poem one would say, somewhat lamely, Man is Nature. The poem moves—almost seems—to rock back and forth from light to dark, life to death; but it also moves through the life/death/life cycles of nature and the way in which man is born, lives, dies and is absorbed back into ever-living nature. The master metaphor of the poem, in other words, cannot be reversed to read: Nature is man. And either attempt to state the master metaphor must, finally, fail because one is too reductive and the other is false. Neither can acknowledge the paradox—or as Burke would have it, the ironic negative—that is repeated over and over in the poem. The metaphor in all its variants, in fact, is a negative which asserts a positive. "Light breaks where no sun shines" might be used to describe the very secret of all metaphors, for do they not assert a positive by stating a negative, a riddle, a categorical absurdity, something that cannot be ("a funeral in the brain") but is? The poem is a kind of dazzling display of metaphorical (and formal) virtuosity by a youthful master of metaphors. It explores what words, and their creations (metaphors, ironies, paradoxes, rhymes, verbal, forms, sounds) can do, and it explores, as Thomas does over and over in other poems, the riddles, mysteries, paradoxes and ironies of the relationship between the word man and wordless nature. A riddle can usually be solved; a true mystery remains mysterious. This poem ends as it begins, but with a difference:

Light breaks on secret lots,  
Oh tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain;  
When logics die,  
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,  
and blood jumps in the sun;  
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.

Nothing is resolved here except an individual life, but life goes on in a different form and the poem could begin allover again, as life does, and has for millions of years. You can solve a riddle without resolving it. If metaphors do anything for us, they teach us how to feel more at home with the ambiguities, uncertainties and paradoxes of human life.

In a great line from one of his westerns (*Yellow Sky*), Gregory Peck, fleeing from a posse, comes to a desert and says, in reply to one of his more negative-minded companions: "A

desert is just a place. A place can be crossed," and sets forth. Taking a similar pragmatic view, we might say that a metaphor is just an ontological riddle. Riddles can be solved. We could then all pretend that we were Gregory Peck of the hermeneutic world and would make it across to Yellow Sky, as he did.

Names, especially those we encounter in literature, are often metaphors. We frequently refer to characters we encounter in poetry, fiction and drama as personas, but this is a very misleading term because it is anti-metaphorical and suggests that these characters are just masks, facades, put-ons and takeoffs, mechanical contrivances, instead of profound symbolic identifications. When Walt Whitman writes of himself as Adam, he has not just created a persona; he has created a metaphor, an ontological riddle. He is not just "like" Adam, he is a *new* Adam who will engender the children of Adam with his metaphors and poems, his spermatic words. And, of course, he did. If we treat Adam as nothing but a persona, a role Whitman is playing in these poems, as if he were just play acting, we have a fundamentally different conception from Adam as a metaphor for the self. We approach the very essence of what metaphor is here, the mystery of metaphor itself. Consider the last poem in the sequence which, true to the spirit of metaphor, begins with an ambiguity: "As Adam early in the morning." The line *could* be read as a comparison, a simile which would mean that Whitman *like* Adam, appears early in the morning "Walking forth from the bower refreshed with sleep." But the whole sequence has made it clear that we should read the "as" literally or (that is, metaphorically, ontologically) because Whitman means that he appears as the re-embodiment of Adam, as a new Adam. He not only is like Adam; in some ways he is Adam, he shares being with him, as the metaphor asserts. The metaphor is magical, or perhaps less menacing, generative, because it invokes the being of Adam and calls it into Whitman. For Whitman, at least, poetry had not yet lost its magic. And as history has confirmed, Whitman got a lot of that magic into his own poetry. His metaphors continue to be the most potent ever created by an American poet. And when we invoke him or write poems to him, we are not invoking the persona of Whitman: we are doing to Whitman what he did to Adam, calling up the ever living presence of Walt Whitman embodied, incarnated in his poems. We are using him as a metaphor.

Metaphors invoke the powers of Proteus, not just the ability to change form, but to become another being, or two beings simultaneously. Words can only invoke and describe this power, but films can actually show it, and often do. Gertrude Stein's assertion that a rose is a rose is a rose is a denial of metaphors.

Walt Whitman is only Walt Whitman, logic asserts—that is, Walt Whitman is Walt Whitman is Walt Whitman—but of course he wasn't, and he knew better than we do. He changed beings more readily and more rapidly than any Greek god, but he was never in disguise—not even in "The Sleepers." When he says that he is a "kosmos," he means it. He has arrived at the ultimate all-inclusive metaphor, not just for the self, but for everything. Though few of us can be a kosmos, like Whitman, most of us have an extraordinary plenitude of being, even in a single day, but especially over the years (as Whitman's child who goes forth does). I am not talking about role-playing here, but about the ontological truth of metaphor when we apply it to ourselves.

As studies of the formative stages of the brain have shown, we are in fact unique and individual. We knew this before scientific studies of the brain confirmed it, but the study showed how it comes about. No two brains ever respond to the same thing in exactly the same way, not even in the case of identical twins. Only robots, presumably, could be programmed to respond to the same thing in the same way, and even then, there might be, there probably are, slight variables in the identical circuitry which would produce slightly

different results. So what does this have to do with metaphor and reality: Metaphors are a function of this uniqueness and individuality, of the amazing inventiveness and creativity of different human minds. We see this in Whitman's poetry and especially in the extraordinary way in which he was always *both* himself, Myself, *and* all those others. He was a metaphorical cornucopia generating ontological riddle after ontological riddle out of the mystery of his copious being.

What a maker of metaphors! They surge into us still, bearers of his generous copious being. He "inhales great drafts of space," he "straddles continents," he "harbors for good or bad," he is "nature without check with original energy"; he sets us again on the great metaphorical "open road" and tells us to "sail forth—steer for the deep waters only" on our "passage to India."

Quite by accident, I pick up a text book on language and writing and encounter this quotation from Roger Sale's *On Writing*: "Metaphor is how we live because it is the way we relate what we see to what we know: this is like that." With all due respect to Roger Sale, he has it mostly wrong, not only once or twice, but also thrice. He starts with metaphor and then defines it as simile; he describes the movement of metaphor as going from the visually perceived or external to the cognitive certainties inside our head, or the internal. Metaphors, then, would all be simple confirmations and an additive cognitive process. There would be no discovery in them, no riddling, no pushing outward toward new discoveries, new realms of being. Metaphors, finally, are certainly not how we live. If we lived our metaphors, we would all be crazies. But I'm being a bit unfair here. "Metaphor is how we live," Sale says, and he means by this that we live by relating what we see to what we know. But for this to be true, we would have to know everything to begin with, as if we were born with total innate knowledge, and grew by accrual, getting fat in the head with more and more comparisons. It is a very safe and mechanical definition of metaphor based upon the assumption that some sort of analogical matrix is at the base of everything. There is no way to be creative in this statement, no way to take risks or risk new discoveries in metaphors, no way to get out of the box of what is already known.

This definition of metaphor cannot stand too many empirical tests: it will not apply to Emily Dickinson's funeral in her brain nor, really, to Dylan Thomas's explorations of the mysterious, paradoxical relationships between man and nature. It is useless for Whitman. More often than not, in our time at least, metaphors explore the unknown rather than bring new experiences (what we see) into the safe circle of the known. Sale's two basic terms here—never stated—are experience and knowledge: what we see and what we know. To these two, he adds a third to dignify metaphor, which is action, or how we live. And finally, the whole process is hung on recognition and confirmation, which is at best, a very static state of affairs.

What do we do with all of the "this is not like that's" which we encounter. There aren't enough "that's" in the world for all the "this's" we encounter to be like. It is in fact the perception that this is not like that, or this is not like anything I know or have ever known, that accounts for so much new knowledge. There is no room for imagination in this definition of metaphor, and no acknowledgement of the fact that you can create anything you like in a metaphor including something you have never seen and do not know.

Well, so much for Sale. I don't really know him at all and I think I only saw him once so I can't be accused of making a metaphor of him—at least not by his own definition. I could pun a lot on his name and offer up his definition For Sale at a flea market, or tell it to sail away—all in good metaphorical fun, of course, on the grounds that it has taken the riddle and mystery out of metaphor and is too thoroughly grounded in empirical reality and cognitive certainties.

If we merely absorb each new experience into what we already know, how can we possibly change and grow. How can "light break where no sun shines"; how can "dawn break. . . . beyond the eyes"? How can we accommodate the mysteries we know to be everywhere around and within us, how can we learn to live with the ironies, paradoxes, and ambiguities which are intrinsic to the human mind and language itself.

Metaphor is not how we live, unless we live by continuously creating and exploring new possibilities atop and beyond existing realities, modifying what we do know by relating it to what we do not know, saying this is not quite like that.

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Borrowing a metaphor from Lewis Thomas, let us push the discussion of this topic "to the end of the solar wind," which is a far piece from its rather homely beginnings among the rocks of reality. If we are ever going to be truly fit to fit into the evolutionary scheme of things, Thomas says, we must take our special species gift, which is our great capacity to "learn" and put it to constructive planetary use. Learning and creating are what we do best, he says, because of our capacity for language and other symbol systems. Nobody is going to argue too much with this statement. But then Thomas lays two terrible burdens on us. We are, he says, whether we like it or not, "the planet's awareness of itself"; and "if we are to become an evolutionary success, fit to fit in," it is up to us "to become the consciousness of the whole earth."<sup>2</sup> Some of our poets, critics and ecologists have assumed this burden: Burke, Whitman, Gary Snyder, W. S. Merwin, Rene Dubos, Barry Commoner, Charles Olson, Ian McHarg—to name but a few. And others have assumed parts of the burden, like Adrienne Rich and Robert Duncan, Barry Lopez and Gregory Bateson. Lewis Thomas, like the old poster of Uncle Sam, turns to us and says: We need you, pointing a peremptory human finger at us, fixing us in the riveting stare of the ancient mariner, telling us that we have a species duty to perform. And furthermore, he has sent this charge to us in a metaphor. If we are the planet's *self-awareness* and the *consciousness* of the whole earth, then we humans have to be the head and all the rest has to be the body, and together we have to be a whole interdependent organism. In other words, we have to make a planetary metaphor out of ourselves. Let us say we are the consciousness of the whole earth and that we get sick in our heads, or go a little crazy, or a lot crazy or abuse our bodies. Planetary disaster. If we are the consciousness of the whole earth, then we are a collective consciousness, billions strong, and we must somehow learn to control what Barry Commoner calls our self-destructive, suicidal motives. To be the planet's awareness of itself, we must be open to everything, as Whitman was, and able to tolerate everything, as Whitman did in "Song of Myself" and "The Sleepers." In fact, we would do well to study Whitman if we believe in the awesome charge Thomas lays on us. Thomas's metaphor is very different from Buckminster Fuller's technological spaceship/earth metaphor—a metaphor also used by biologist Garret Hardin. Thomas is much closer to the metaphors of the poets and reminds us that if we are to become the consciousness of the whole earth then we better tend to our metaphors and perhaps even institute a *metaphor watch* to make sure that some part of this consciousness has not fallen victim to dangerous metaphors. The metaphors of the Reagan administration, for example, bear very close watching. They acknowledge only a fragment of the whole earth, seem to derive almost entirely from an economic view of planetary reality and are combative and warlike to a terrifying degree.

How can we act on Thomas's noble and necessary metaphorical charge: what is a planetary self and what sort of consciousness does the whole earth have? What metaphors can express these riddles and mysteries, what ontology could accommodate the reality of a planetary self, what psychology could account for a whole earth consciousness? If our metaphors only confirm what we already know, it is hopeless. Our metaphors must do some of our thinking

and discovering for us. They must create new realities we take as a matter of course but about which, as Thomas points out, we know next to nothing—yet. We should take our poets more seriously. We should learn to think ecologically, eco-poetically.

The body does not make metaphors, the head does. The body is a source of metaphors: the arm of God, the heart of the matter, the ass hole of the earth, the ear of the president, the eyes of the nation, smell out trouble, a splenetic person, a pimple on the ass of fate; he is a shithead, the head of state, the navel of the earth, this place is an armpit. It would be hard to do justice to the thoroughness and inventiveness with which the head has made metaphors out of the body, including the diseases of the body and all of its functions. Fart blossom, my young son shouts, toe jam. I'll leave my metaphorical self there.

If we are the head and nature is the body, we have made nature into a metaphor. There are no metaphors in nature. Nature is not our body. We constantly make metaphors out of nature, mining it with our metaphorical minds as we do with our real tools and machines. The metaphors we use for nature are crucial. They tell our story: Planet steward, pilots of spaceship earth, planet's consciousness, rulers of the earth. Everything we do to the earth has metaphorical implication. Strip mining ravages the earth. If we are the planet's consciousness and the whole earth's self-awareness, then strip mining, air pollution, water pollution, oil drilling, oil spills should all cause us pain and sickness since we are doing them to our own body. They would be forms of masochism, a kind of self-flagellation. Some parts of our body would already be sick unto death and maimed beyond restoration. Thomas's metaphor bears thinking on, because we like to think of nature as other, so that when we do something to nature we are not doing it to ourselves but to *the other*, to something that is not us, and is insentient anyway. Poets, hunters, primitive peoples, naturalists, ecologists have been telling us differently for years, especially in the metaphors.

Acts are often metaphors, or at least metaphorical. The people who shoved Jews into ovens had turned them into garbage first. All metaphors are identification: This equals that. Jews were garbage. You changed their reality with a metaphor, with some word magic. You pick up the garbage and dispose of it in the most efficient way possible. You transport it in boxcars like cattle. You go through the garbage to make sure nothing of value is being destroyed by mistake. You maximize the use of the garbage—turn it into soap and lamp shades, for example. Sometimes you burn the garbage, sometimes you bury it. If you don't bury it, it is unsightly and smells. Burning is the most efficient: the soap made out of the ashes can be given to the prisoners of war. You would not want to use Jew-garbage soap on yourself. This garbage is the waste product of humanity. What is wanted is an efficient disposal system. In Africa before WWI, the Germans disposed of a hundred thousand pieces of black garbage when they threatened to become too human. Human garbage has been plentiful everywhere: there is American Indian garbage, black garbage, Chinese garbage, Russian garbage. All have been disposed of by the word killers, by the slaughtering metaphors created so readily by the human mind. We remember the Jews because the event is still close to us. We forget the Indians because we turned them into garbage ourselves when they got in our way, and anyway that was a hundred years ago.

If you have seen one redwood, you have seen them all, so you cut down all but one redwood, or authorize others to do so. In this way, never having really looked at a redwood, since no two redwoods are the same, you turn redwood trees into Xerox copies and justify their slaughter by the chain saws. You do not alter the reality of the redwood trees with this buried metaphor, which transforms an organic tree into a mechanical thing. The trees are still as organic and unique as ever. The head that views the trees and gives the orders has been altered inside; the hands that guide the chain saws have responded to a metaphor. A metaphor

has prepared the way for action. Metaphors do in fact alter reality. When the trees are gone reality is not the same. A clear-cut area has reduced trees to their own tombstones. The rights of trees have been abrogated by a metaphor. One metaphor has been stronger than another. A completely different metaphor is necessary to even conceive of the idea that trees have rights and the right to a lawyer to defend them. Human law has always been for humans, their pets and domesticated animals. Dogs have more rights than trees. If we were to act on Thomas's charge, we would have to re-conceive the law and change our metaphors for the natural world.

Dolphins are called the gangsters of the sea by Japanese fishermen because they eat the fish upon which these fishermen depend for their livelihood. (The dolphins, in fact, are only eating the fish upon which they also depend for their own livelihood.) You can't really put these gangster dolphins in jail, so you make them pay the ultimate penalty for their crime, as humans usually do with natural predators who get in their way. You catch them and punish them for their crime by putting them through a shredder and turning them into pet food. There are no gangsters in nature except human ones. The conflict between human law and natural law is a conflict between metaphor and reality. We have created many monsters out of natural creatures with our metaphors: out of sharks, ants, bears, birds, rabbits, bees, snakes, coyotes, wolves, alligators. Should we conclude from this that the head is terrified by the body; or that the head, is not really "connected" to the body. If this were so, we could hardly be the consciousness of the whole earth or the planet's awareness of itself. An implacable dualism would pervade everything and there would be no way to resolve the agonistic relationship between man and nature. But it is worse than that because man has been killing man for as long as he has been killing nature. Jews and Indians turned into garbage; dolphins turned into gangsters; sharks turned into monsters; trees turned into anonymities; words, words, words, metaphors, metaphors. We are not going to resolve mankind's ferocious dualism here. The world of words is filled with death-dealing metaphors and our minds are sick with them: Moslems and Christians, Jews and Arabs, Whites and Blacks, Radicals and Conservatives, Sheep Ranchers and Coyotes, Humans and Insects. We make metaphors out of our antinomies. Joe Christmas did not create himself. We created him—or rather, Faulkner did—out of insane hatreds, and demonic, pestilential metaphors.

The topic is clearly endless, but we must come to closure. We write for contemplation and discovery, for tolerance and understanding. We should be merchants of peaceful ideas, like Kenneth Burke. We should all strive to purify war. Especially the war of words. Metaphors are more dangerous than handguns. They are everybody's concealed weapon. The metaphors of advertising foment continuous discontent by always promising more with this product rather than that one. They make us crazy with acquisitiveness. Their wars are endless, Vietnam forever. Only the political and ideological religious wars are worse. Move on, move on. Let's end up on the rocks of reality where we began.

Pure metaphor; pure reality. Before there were humans and words, there were no metaphors. Now reality is clogged and befouled with them. God himself is nothing but a metaphor. The different Gods are all metaphors fighting with each other. If there is any such thing as a pure metaphor, God must be it—my god, your god, his god, their god. Poor God: look what has happened to him. Pure once, he has been fouled by the Babylonian human mind that first created *Him*. God as a pure metaphor, as pure ontological riddle, as pure human creation, as pure words. God is the father/mother of us all. God is the father/mother/son of us all. Here we have arrived at pure perfection, not pure reality but pure perfection, pure metaphor. We have created ourselves.

Pure reality is the world without metaphor. It does in fact exist, but we can never perceive it directly, unmediated by words or technology. Science tries: physics, chemistry, biology, geology and ecology—all try. We try constantly to photograph it, paint it, render it in words, record it in other symbols. But in a sense it is all metaphor, this in terms of that, Burke's old paradox of substance, something in terms of what it is not. A photograph is all optics, mechanics, electronics, and chemicals 125th of a second here, 1000th of a second there, ASA 64 or 200 or 400; Ektachrome or Kodachrome, nothing but a fragment of reality brought to us by high technology. The reality science presents us with is almost entirely symbolic in the most literal sense of this term since it is presented to us in symbols that represent physical, chemical, biological or ecological realities. It is good to remember the old cautionary formula Gregory Bateson repeats so often in *Mind and Nature*: the map is not the territory it charts (the words are not the things they name; the symbols are not the physical realities they identify and codify). In a sense, all of these "representations" of reality are metaphors and riddles written in the various languages or symbol-systems man has invented. One says reality is words, another says reality is pictures, another says reality is mathematical formulae, another says reality is chemical formulae. Reality is all of these and none of these. It is easier to say what pure metaphor is than it is to say what pure reality is.

Metaphors create their own reality while attempting to explain some part of the other reality—our origins, the origins of the earth, the mysteries of creation, the riddles of being. Nothing is more real than the fact that we mediate every reality with our metaphors, and often create realities more real and powerful than reality itself with them. It is tempting to say that metaphors are too much with us and prevent us from having direct contact with reality. But that is absurd. Metaphors cannot be too much with us because we do not have any choice in the matter. They are intrinsic to symbol-using. The worst thing that can happen to you is not to know when you are dealing with metaphors, to mistake metaphors for reality, or fail to understand how reality is being mediated by a particular overt or covert metaphor. Metaphorical naiveté is not charming, as some other forms of naiveté are; it is dangerous, just as naïve verbal realism is.

### Notes

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1. Poems that one thinks of when reading about Emily's metaphorical funerals: E. A. Robinson's "Credo" and "Luke Havergal"; Whitman's "Passage to India"; T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday." And perhaps, more jocularly, Steven's "To a High Toned Old Christian Lady" and, less jocularly, "Sunday Morning."
2. Page 52 in Thomas's "Are We Fit to Fit In?" *Sierra* 67.2 (March/April 1982): 49-52.

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